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ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT AND U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**JOINT NEWS RELEASE OF JUNE 12, 2007:****Arizona Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service take joint action to restore the historic Kofa National Wildlife Refuge desert bighorn sheep herd**

YUMA — Officials of the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service have agreed upon a comprehensive approach to the restoration of the desert bighorn sheep herd on the Service's Kofa National Wildlife Refuge. Through an intensive and coordinated effort over the last several months, the agencies have completed "The Investigative Report and Recommendations on the Kofa Bighorn Sheep Herd" to address the herd's recent decline. The report follows the November 2006 joint announcement that the triennial survey of the Kofa bighorn sheep herd indicated a more than 50 percent decline in the bighorn population from the 2000 survey estimate of 812, to an historic low estimate of 390 animals.

While noting that, in desert environments, drought is almost certainly the most limiting environmental factor for bighorn sheep and other desert species, the November announcement also recognized that despite increased rainfall conditions since the 2003 survey, there was a disconcerting continued decline in herd numbers. The likely causes for continued decline noted at that time -- permanent water availability, predation, disease and public recreational disturbance to critical lambing areas -- provided the immediate basis for a joint investigation by both Service and Department biologists.

The resulting document takes a comprehensive look at the full array of likely causes and outlines recommendations for actions on various fronts to restore the herd to a size that the habitat will support and will enable renewal of the transplant program that was discontinued in 2006 in response to the population survey findings.

Coincidentally, June marks the 50th anniversary of the first successful transplant of desert bighorn sheep from Kofa, when four sheep were transferred from the Refuge to resurrect an extirpated herd at Black Gap Wildlife Management Area in Texas. Since that time, more than 500 Kofa National Wildlife Refuge sheep have been moved to sites in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas, making the Refuge the primary source of sheep for the reestablishment and sustainment of desert bighorn sheep populations from areas where they have been extirpated or gone into decline.

In keeping with the recommendations of the report, actions have already been initiated to include the June 3 completion of an 11,000 gallon buried underground water system at Yaqui Tank in the Kofa Mountains; identified in the report as a permanent water source critical to bighorn sheep. A second water project is scheduled for later in June. Additional recommendations are also being acted upon to include the continued collaring and tracking of mountain lions in the recently established resident lion population, collaring and tracking of bighorn sheep and planning for the first of a series of annual bighorn sheep population surveys to more closely track trends in the population.

Substantial potential funding for these projects has already been identified, with contributions pending from Department, Service, and sportsmen organizations. The Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society is providing 40 percent of the 2007 budget and the Service will provide \$75,000 annually through 2012 to study the interactions of mountain lions and bighorn sheep on the Refuge.

The size, location, and unfragmented nature of Kofa have long been recognized as a nearly unique combination that has made its 435 square miles of sheep habitat especially productive. Its historic importance to the continued sustainment and expansion of the desert bighorn sheep -- an almost iconic symbol of the desert southwest -- is unequalled by any other location.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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